

Professional visits to Japan and China.

Time Frame: 1988-1990's.

I have visited Japan many times, to attend scientific meetings and for personal reasons, visiting my in-laws, visiting my son in Okinawa or combining scientific meetings with side trips to explore the country. I enjoy being in Japan, although the first time I did meet with some hostility, not personal, but because I was part of a group of Americans. The owner of a Yakitori bar in Sinjuku, a part of Tokyo did not want a group of us to enter his restaurant. Foreigners are “gaijin”, which I assume is similar to the Yiddish “goy”. It is used to describe an outsider or foreigner. Japan is a very homogenous society and someone who is different in appearance and dress is looked upon with suspicion. On the other hand it is a very polite society, well organized, and clean. The country has excellent hotels, and restaurants, albeit a little expensive for the average American tourist.

My first visit to Japan in July of 1988 was to participate in an international meeting on purine metabolism. The venue was Hakone, a resort famous for its hot springs and lakes, not far from Tokyo. I had belonged to the International Purine and Pyrimidine Society since its founding in 1972 and this organization held wonderful meetings every 3 years, in the major cities or universities of Europe and Asia, where there was a local group of scientists interested in organizing the meeting. I do not remember much about the scientific content of the meeting but was favorably impressed by Japan, and the hospitality shown to us. Of course there was a book published after the conference of the scientific papers allowing for detailed recollection.

A non-scientific highlight of this visit was immersion in a Japanese hot spring. These are naturally occurring hot springs that occur all over Japan. I was surprised at the pre-cleaning, scrubbing and attention to hygiene that the Japanese performed before entering the springs. Everyone scrubbed themselves at little basins before entering the water. Hakone has dozens of hot springs some for men and women only others are mixed. The one we (I and some other participants of the conference) attended was mixed and it was slightly comical observing elderly ladies and men walking around in the nude quite uninhibited, with a small towel held in front. In contradiction to what I just wrote, I suppose that means there was a certain amount of inhibition.

Hakone is a very beautiful verdant area in the mountains with a fast flowing river and a lake with boats looking like pirate ships. There are many museums in the area, including a famous outdoor sculpture museum. The hot springs are spread over a few miles, surrounded by large Ryokans (Japanese style hotels)

A second visit in 1990 was to attend a meeting on “Differentiation Therapy” held in Chiba, again not far from Tokyo, in a very elegant golf resort. The resort contained a wonderful French restaurant called Boulogne in the hotel Trinity. Interesting how the Japanese love to copy European culture in their names, and to my surprise there were French restaurants at many locations. I arrived at the Chiba resort in the evening and was shown to a cabin following registration. I entered the cabin, and went directly to bed, tired after the long flight, although I did notice small shoes by the other beds, and thought it peculiar. Well perhaps Japanese males had small feet! When I awoke in the morning I found I was in a cabin with female participants. The Japanese coordinator was not familiar with the name Milton and had placed me with

the women. The next day I moved to a more suitable accommodation. Everything was very elegant, and no expense was spared in making us comfortable and providing us with gourmet food. I remember talking to one of the Japanese scientist at the opening reception and he remarked on the expensive sandwiches of sliced meat we were enjoying. It was the only time in his life he had eaten Kobe Beef, something normally unaffordable.

Professors Giovanni Rossi, from Rome and Sam Waxman from Mt Sinai Hospital, organized the meeting. I had collaborated with Giovanni while on Sabbatical at the virology institute in Rome. The meeting's object was to explore whether treating cancer cells with agents such as interferon or other cytokines would induce cancerous cells to revert to normal, and whether cytokines would inhibit cancer growth and thus be of clinical significance. From this was born the idea of using innate immunity and cytokines to inhibit cancer growth, now a very active area of clinical research, immunotherapy.

Giovanni died of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in February 1994. At the time of the meeting or even in the following few years none of us knew he was ill. He continued working at the Sanita (equivalent to NIH) in Rome until the end of his life. It was because of Giovanni that I returned for a second Sabbatical to Rome to work with his students and group.

In 1992 the annual International Conference on Interferon Research was held in Tokyo. I convinced Mimi to accompany me.. She was hesitant, since she did not expect to enjoy the Far East, with its overpopulation, in particular a city like Tokyo with 20 million plus inhabitants. She also had doubts about the Japanese aesthetic and culture, including food. To her surprise she did enjoy the Japanese aesthetic, cleanliness and superb organization. She and some of the other wives of scientists explored Tokyo and surroundings and enjoyed

the visit. After the scientific meeting we spent a few days on our own exploring central Japan, including a trip to Kanazawa to a textile museum, with a world -class collection of Kimonos. Kanazawa proved to be a very interesting town. It does not get many foreign tourists, and everyone went out of the way to be nice to us, offering to share food at the bar in the hotel, and encouraging us to order some local dishes, which were to our taste buds inedible (daikon pickled in Saki). It was during this trip that we acquired a taste for “ Shabu-Shabu” and Mongolian Hot Pot.

In May 1993 I made a whirlwind speaking tour of Japan to promote the use of consensus interferon in the treatment of hepatitis C. Everything went so fast that I do not remember all the details. Larry Blatt, representing Amgen, organized the trip. I was the scientist and he was the salesman. I gave lectures at a large number of University Medical Schools. This included Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto to mention just a few. I do remember staying in great luxury in Tokyo and Kyoto where I delivered numerous lectures. I stayed in Tokyo in the Hyatt in Shinjuku, a very modern section of Tokyo, with expensive hotels and restaurants, and in Kyoto in the very elegant Miyako Hotel, where breakfast was served on Royal Copenhagen dinnerware. The tour was very successful, and the Japanese physicians were very interested in the product. Wherever I went I found people very polite and hospitable. Apparently I also convinced them to use the Amgen Consensus Interferon in the treatment of hepatitis C. Amgen later sold the right of production and distribution to a Japanese pharmaceutical company, Yamanouchi.

While in Japan I followed up on an invitation from Dr. M. and Dr. D., who had worked in my lab as visiting scholars, to visit Hangzhou University in China and give a seminar. I flew from Narita, Tokyo to Shanghai where a driver from the university met me. This was just before the economic boom and building spree in China. The drive from Shanghai airport to Hangzhou was interesting, past farms with farm laborers working under the most primitive conditions, fields being ploughed with oxen and primitive wooden ploughs. The road was in bad condition and it took us six hours to cover 100 miles. I stayed in the university guesthouse, which was very simple and felt quite Spartan compared to the 1st class hotels of Tokyo. The room was small, and I was provided with a thermos flask of hot tea rather than a coffee or teapot. The view from the window was grim; the guesthouse looked onto factories, and in the early morning a group of people exercised outside. The air was thick with smog. I felt quite depressed and not really excited by my surroundings.

Dr. D. hosted a dinner that first evening. It was an elaborate banquet, but not to my taste. I indiscreetly asked what kind of soup I was imbibing and told snake soup. It did not spoil my appetite, but did not add to it. The next course was some kind of crab in its shell, which tasted as if cooked in rancid oil. I was able to drown out the taste with bad wine. I may have become quite tipsy as a result. However my host thought I really enjoyed the wine, so much so, that on my departure from China I was given a few bottles to take back to the States. I cannot remember the other courses but the meal went on for a long time.

The next day I gave my seminar, I assume on gene therapy or interferon. Following the seminar I had a frightening experience. The taxi driver took me to the wrong guesthouse or he did not know where the guesthouse was located. He let me out at a location that was supposed to be nearby. However I

did not recognize the area and since no one talked English, I wandered around quite panicky. I could not read a sign nor talk to anyone. Eventually I saw a modern building in the distance that from its appearance could be a hotel. I made for it, and luckily some one at reception did talk English, gave me a map and instructions how to get to the guesthouse. I really don't remember how I got there, I think the receptionist called another taxi, but I eventually did and was able to rest so that my panic subsided.

Two students had been assigned to show me around the campus and town. They were a delightful couple. One of them Cheng-ju Hu a year later joined my laboratory.

I did see a more attractive part of the city. Beautiful parks containing extensive peony gardens. This was probably the Hangzhou Botanical Gardens. West Lake was very pretty with large old-fashioned ships sailing in the quiet waters. The lake is surrounded by mountains and has pagodas and temples on its banks. What I found most appealing was the open-air ballroom dancing that was occurring at the cafes on the lakeshore. People seemed to be happy and enjoying themselves. I did not realize that the gardens of Hangzhou are world famous and this is now a UNESCO heritage site.

The next day and my last in China was to culminate in a trip to Shanghai accompanied by Dr. M. It had been arranged that her niece, a young girl of 16, or 17 would be our guide. She was attending an international training school for future diplomats. Our troubles started at the train station. The officials would not allow Dr. M to accompany me in the same compartment. I had to take the compartment reserved for foreigners, and she had to sit with the "locals". There ensued a shouting match between Dr. M and the officials, not only about the seating but I think also about the cost of the ticket, since she

was paying for me, and there was a different rate for foreigners. Finally the official gave in and we sat together for the 2-hour train ride in the ‘foreigners’ section, which was much quieter than the rest of the train.

On arrival in Shanghai, we needed a taxi to meet in the center of the city with Dr. Ma’s sister and her daughter. Again an argument occurred. There was a separate line for foreigners (who had preference) and another line for local residents. Dr. M stood in line with me, and there were shouts and abuse from other’s standing by who insisted that both of us get in line for locals. Eventually we got a taxi (I think through the foreigners line) and off we went to meet her sister. Dr. Ma was one very tough lady.

Dr. M’s niece was an attractive young girl, full of enthusiasm for the communist party and the regime. We started our tour in “downtown” Shanghai, where there were numerous large department stores, and we passed by what appeared to be elegant restaurants with tables nicely set with good linen and china. I noticed the price for lunch was very reasonable, even with the skewed rate of exchange for foreigners. When I suggested we have lunch in one of these, the niece (I can not remember her name) stated under no circumstance would she eat in a private, capitalist restaurant, but only at the “workers kitchen”. We ended up having lunch of chicken that was so blue and tough with age, that I could hardly eat it.

I wanted to go shopping to purchase Mimi some pearls or a coral necklace. Again the same experience: only in stores run by the communist party or city of Shanghai, not in any of the new developing “private” stores. Thus it continued throughout the day non-stop praise for the communist party. Eventually we arrived at the Yangtze River. She pointed out to me the highest building on the river, and declaimed it as a “Jew building”. I think she had no

idea what she was talking about. It was the building built by the financier Sassoon, who came from a British- Iraqi Jewish family. She obviously was spouting what she had learned in school. At that time it was the tallest building in Shanghai and was in fact the first tall building to be built in the far east. It is now a hotel (it was at one time the headquarters of the “ gang of four”) . I imagine it is now dwarfed by skyscrapers.

After the tour they took me to my hotel, where no one spoke English. Since Dr. M of Hangzhou University was paying for this, she had avoided a tourist hotel. I ended up eating dinner by myself, since Dr. M had returned home.. I was shown a menu with pictures, and as a first course I ordered some dumplings, thinking I would get two or three. When the dish arrived I had sufficient dumplings to feed the whole restaurant. I tried offering some around but all declined. I cancelled the rest of the meal, the dumplings were very good and I went to bed gastronomically satisfied but stuffed.

I flew the next day back to Narita and then home. This really was an interesting trip. I had been wined and dined in luxury in Japan, and an “ honored” guest in Hangzhou. I had later many students from that university, all of whom I think, stayed in the USA, and have been very successful and contributed to science. These include Gen-sheng Feng and Cheng-ju Hu both now professors at major US universities.